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ABSTRACT

The history, development, and content of the notional-functional "threshold-level" (T-level) syllabus and the application of its principles in the preparation of new second language instructional materials are outlined. The context for development of the syllabus by the Council of Europe was based on the need for a uniform, sequenced program of second language learning applicable to all European languages and in all European countries. Examples are given for adult instruction in English as a second language. Despite the fact that very few courses or texts based entirely on T-level syllabus principles have been designed, the work focusing on the semantic and social aspects of language has been worthwhile. Forty-six references are included. (MSE)

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THE THRESHOLD LEVEL:
A NOTIONAL-FUNCTIONAL SYLLABUS

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0. INTRODUCTION

In 1971, in Rüschlikon, Switzerland, the Council for Cultural Co-operation, a permanent agency of the Council of Europe, sponsored a symposium on "Linguistic content, means of evaluation, and their interaction in the teaching and learning of modern languages in adult education." The impetus to hold such a conference had come from the increasing movement across national boundaries within postwar Europe of workers seeking better jobs, business people developing broader markets, and students needing specialized training. While the traditional barriers of culture and language were becoming less formidable, the Council recognized that more should be done to further its goal of promoting the study of modern languages in order to encourage European integration.

Accordingly, the symposium identified three tasks (Council of Europe, 1973, p. 9):

(1) To analyze the foreign language needs of adults in Europe,

(2) to set up an operational specification of learning objectives for adult foreign language instruction, and

(3) to define the structure of a multi-media learning system for a unit/credit system of out-of-school education.

A committee of experts was subsequently appointed, under the leadership of J.L.M. Trim of Cambridge University in England, to carry out those tasks. Their ultimate goal was to set up a system of equivalent course sequences for the learning of any and all European languages by European adults and to work out a system of awarding credits for such learning which would be recognized all over Western Europe and Great Britain, a so-called unit/credit system.

By 1975, the committee had completed the needs assessment and published a list of specifications for the first certifiable stage of foreign language learning, which is called in English the Threshold level (T-level). These specifications are now available in equivalent versions for the learning of English (van Ek, 1975), French (Coste, 1976), and Spanish (Slagter, 1977), and others are under development.

This so-called T-level syllabus has caught the attention of foreign language teachers and theorists on both sides of the Atlantic. Even those unaware of this particular project have seen the terms "notional" and "functional," which are associated with the approach to foreign language teaching exemplified by the T-level syllabus, in brochures announcing some recently published language teaching materials. But what those terms mean and where they came from may not be well understood. The following discussion will, therefore, outline the development and content of the notional-functional T-level syllabus and how its principles have been applied in the preparation of new materials for teaching, in this case, English as a foreign language to adults. For fuller treatments of the issues and procedures involved, the reader should consult the references listed at the end of this article.

1. DEVELOPMENT OF THE T-LEVEL SYLLABUS

Charged with the task of developing a uniform system for teaching languages to adults throughout Europe, the committee set out to determine what those adults might have in common regarding their needs to learn and use foreign languages. Recent studies have shown that the more students feel that the language they are learning can be of immediate communicative use to them, the more motivated they will be to learn it well (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Savignon, 1972; Galyean, 1977; etc.). Thus, the committee's early efforts were devoted to surveying European adults about how they use, or could use, foreign languages in their businesses, social contacts, educational settings, etc.

René Richterich of Eurocenters in Neuchâtel was charged with developing the surveys, collating the responses, and preparing profiles from them of adult foreign language learners. Each profile indicated a typical learner's occupational or avocational purpose for using the foreign language, the general situations in which the language would probably be used, and the most common communicative acts that would need to be performed by such a person in that language. (See Richterich's article on needs assessment in Council of Europe, 1973, and Richterich and Chancerel, 1977, for details of his procedures.) In addition, some indication was given in the profile as to the relative importance of the four general skills of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing and as to what types of communicative activities would be related to each skill. For example, a profile for university students shows that they would need to speak and understand everyday conversation as well as the specialized language of academia; of somewhat less importance to them would be the ability to write in connection with the discipline studied (see Fig. 1). By way of contrast, a profile for agricultural workers shows less of a need to read than the student profile does.

These general profiles and models developed by Richterich were to serve as guides in the committee's major task of identifying a "common core" of language items that would enable learners to "maintain themselves in most everyday situations [in a foreign language environment], including situations for which they [had] not been specifically trained" (van Ek, 1975, p. 8). The committee felt strongly that instruction in grammatical patterns and vocabulary, though necessary, is insufficient to ensure the immediate communicative use of the language that most adult learners would expect and require. They therefore undertook a partly systematic, partly intuitive analysis of English to determine what interrelated elements it consists of and how those elements could be represented in the core of a language course. (See Trim et al., 1973, for a summary of these deliberations and the methods used.)

Their analysis, which is based in large part on speech act and information processing theories, produced five categories of language items:

semantic notions (concepts of entities in time and space),

communicative functions (what a speaker is trying to do by means of language),

topics (what is talked/written about),

Major category

Minor category 6-1: Agricultural workers	
Comments	Agricultural workers will need to know a foreign language only if they work abroad.
Understanding	--Will be required to understand a language of everyday communication and a fairly specialized language. (+)
Speaking	--Will be required to speak a language of everyday communication and a fairly specialized language. (+)
Reading	--Will be required to read certain documents in connection with daily life and the activities concerned. (o)
Writing	--Will be required to complete certain administrative forms. (o)

Major category
Non-agricultural workers and labourers and operators of transport appliances

Comments	Persons in this category will require a foreign language only if they work abroad.
Understanding	--Will be required to understand a language of everyday communication and a fairly specialized language according to the sector of industry. (+)
Speaking	--Will be required to speak a language of everyday communication and a fairly specialized language according to the sector of industry. (+)
Reading	--Will be required to read certain documents in connection with daily life and the activities concerned. (o)
Writing	--Will be required to complete certain administrative forms. (o)

Major category
Workers not classifiable by occupation

Minor category X-1: Students	
Comments	Students tend increasingly to pursue all or part of their studies in educational establishments abroad.
Understanding	--Will be required to understand a language of everyday communication and a specialized language according to the discipline studied. (+)
Speaking	--Will be required to speak a language of everday communication and a specialized language. (+)
Reading	--Will be required to read papers, articles and documents in connection with the discipline studied. Need for a specialized language. (+)
Writing	--Will be required to write texts in connection with the discipline studied. (o)

Figure 1. Profiles of Adult Language Learners' Needs (Trim et al., 1973)

situations (where the communication occurs and with whom), and

language activities (listening, speaking, reading, writing).

It is from the first two of these categories, which have not received much attention in traditional language courses, that the term "notational-functional" derives to characterize the committee's approach to foreign language course development. As van Ek (1977) has explained the overall scheme, "The basic characteristic of the model is that it tries to specify foreign language ability as a skill rather than knowledge. It analyzes what the learner will have to be able to *do* in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what *language-forms* (words, structures, etc.) the learner will have to be able to handle in order to *do* all that has been specified."

At first glance, this does not seem to depart significantly from the familiar dictum of Audiolingualism to "teach the language, not about the language." Yet it does indeed go a great deal further by giving top priority to learning how to use the foreign language for immediate and practical communication with native speakers. This is not merely the ability to put words into syntactic slots or even to produce snatches of memorized dialog in certain anticipated contexts. The goal here is appropriate sociolinguistic behavior--whether at a cocktail party, in a business conference, or on the phone--using a limited repertoire of lexical and syntactic elements to express one's intentions adequately.

The committee's final and most awesome task in preparing the T-level syllabus was, therefore, to distill the most common and least complex items from each of the five categories and fit them into a set of operational objectives for adult learners to achieve at the basic stages of foreign language learning. To some extent this has been accomplished in the two syllabuses, Threshold level (1975) and Waystage (1977), which have appeared so far. But the authors have stated repeatedly that these represent only tentative formulations that need to be tested and revised many times before they can be proven workable (Richterich and Chancerel, 1978, p. 5; van Ek, 1975, p. iii). And there is still a very long way to go before the committee's third task, that of outlining a multi-media foreign language learning system for all of Europe, is achieved. Nevertheless, the T-level syllabus and its associated publications have shed new light on the pedagogical implications of developments in the fields of socio- and psycholinguistics. Curriculum developers have been given a challenge to consider approaching foreign language course design from the learner's perspective of language use rather than from the teacher's perspective of structure.

2. CONTENT

A syllabus, as Europeans use the term, is a master list of all of the items and concepts which should be included in a course of instruction. It is not a series of lesson plans, as the term "syllabus" might denote in American academic usage. Therefore, the Waystage and T-level syllabuses consist mainly of lists or inventories of notions, functions, and topics appropriate to the communicative needs of adult foreign language learners with the following characteristics:

(1) they will be temporary visitors to the foreign country (especially tourists);

or (2) they will have temporary contacts with foreigners in their own country;

(3) their contacts with foreign language speakers will, on the whole, be of a superficial, non-professional type;

(4) they will primarily need only a basic level of command of the foreign language (van Ek, 1975, p. 9).

By "basic level" or T-level is meant the proficiency achieved after at least 250 hours of instruction. Realizing that some students might get discouraged before that goal was in sight, the committee outlined the content of an even more elementary "survival" level, called Waystage, which would not carry any credit but would guide the early stages of learning and instruction.

Neither the Waystage nor the Threshold-level syllabus tells the instructor how to teach the language items or in what order during a course. Each syllabus simply lists the items that have been distilled from the inventories of those commonly required by European adults in face-to-face foreign language situations. The fact that there has never before been such a list is what makes these syllabuses so interesting. It would be neither practical nor particularly useful here to give more than a sampling of some of the items listed in the T-level syllabus; however, that should suffice to demonstrate its scope and content.

The model upon which the T-level syllabus (van Ek, 1975) is based consists of eight components, each of which is either presented as an inventory or defined as a performance objective:

(1) *The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics which will be dealt with.*

The situations, which are identified by Richterich's needs assessments and learner profiles, are subdivided into the four components of social roles (e.g., stranger to stranger, friend to friend), psychological roles (e.g., neutrality, equality, sympathy, antipathy), settings, and topics. While the topics tend to be of familiar traveler's-phrase-book type such a personal identification, occupation, travel, and leisure, the list of suggested settings provides an interesting dimension: outdoors/indoors, private life/public life, and human surroundings.

(2) *The language activities in which the learner will engage.*

These are traditional skills of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing, although the latter two are narrowly restricted for the T-level to such items as filling out forms and reading public notices. Only two pages of the T-level syllabus are devoted to describing and exemplifying these four skills.

(3) *The language functions which the learner will fulfill.*

The functions, which are pivotal to the communicative approach of the instruction envisioned by the committee, are subcategorized as:

(a) imparting and seeking factual information,
(b) expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes,
(c) expressing and finding out emotional attitudes,
(d) expressing and finding out moral attitudes,
(e) getting things done (suasion), and
(f) socializing.

It is one of the hallmarks of notional-functional textbooks to contain chapters bearing those categories as titles. Van Ek makes clear that this list is not meant to be exhaustive but to exemplify language functions which should be under the control of a T-level learner, no matter the foreign language being studied.

(4) *What the learner will be able to do with respect to each topic.*

Here each of the topics listed earlier (e.g., identification, occupation, leisure activities) is given a set of behavioral specifications. So, for example, under the general topic of "health and welfare" one finds that among other things, learners should be able to "report illness, injury, accident; say whether they have been ill before and whether they have been operated upon; say whether they have to take medicine regularly, if so, what medicine..." (p. 25). This section is thus one of the most helpful in clarifying the objectives of T-level instruction and learning.

(5) *The general notions which the learner will be able to handle*, and

(6) *The specific (topic-related) notions which the learner will be able to handle.*

These sections are perhaps the most controversial because they represent an attempt to categorize the basic "concepts which people use in verbal communication" (p. 29) and to list them in a mere four pages. D.A. Wilkins, who contributed this section to the syllabus, later wrote a book entitled *Notional Syllabuses* (Wilkins, 1976) in which he listed, with very little empirical support, over 300 so-called notions and argued for basing language courses on their subcategories rather than on such grammar categories as parts of speech and verb tenses. His arguments for doing so are persuasive from a pedagogical standpoint, if not from a scientific one, claiming as they do that learners will be more highly motivated by materials that teach them *what* to communicate rather than merely *how*. But later writers (e.g., Widdowson, 1979) have objected that providing a list of notions and some ways of expressing them can no more guarantee that the learners will be able to communicate in the foreign language than does providing them with sentence patterns or dialogs to memorize.

In any case, the general notions, which are given here under the three categories of entities, properties and qualities, and relations, do

seem to provide a sounder basis than word-frequency lists for selecting the vocabulary to be taught.

(7) *The language forms which the learner will be able to use.*

Here the T-level syllabus becomes language-specific, listing the English phrases and syntactic patterns needed for expressing the kinds of notions and functions given earlier. This section makes up nearly one-third of the entire syllabus. Each item or pattern listed is labelled P or R to indicate whether the learner should be able to *produce* or merely *recognize* and comprehend it.

For example, in the section on functions entitled "Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes," one subdivision is "seeking permission." Listed there (p. 39) are the following:

May I	+	VP	P
Can I	+	VP	R
Let me	+	VP	R
Do you mind	+	if-clause	R

(VP stands for verb phrase.) This indicates that the learner would be expected to be able to use the first item by the time T-level is attained but only to comprehend the other three in a conversation.

This section of the syllabus also represents a unique contribution to the specification of the content of foreign language courses; seldom has such a complete and explicit inventory been provided for the teacher and course designer. Included here, too, are most of the recommended vocabulary items, each of which is associated with a general notion and labelled P or R to indicate the type of control the learner should have over it at T-level.

(8) *The degree of skill with which the learner will be able to perform.*

In a scant three pages, van Ek discusses the problems associated with specifying criteria for foreign language communication and assessing the attainment. He leaves it to others to develop valid and reliable methods of measuring T-level proficiency in a manner that will lead to the awarding or withholding of credits within the language-teaching scheme to be set in place all over Europe. Chaplen (1975) presented a more thorough discussion of the issues to the committee. Some promising instruments are under development in Britain and elsewhere (see, for example, ELTDU and British Council).

Two appendices complete the T-level syllabus: an alphabetical list of the lexicon cross-referenced to the earlier sections, and an inventory of the grammatical content. Together they make up one-half of the entire syllabus, a fact which might reassure those who are dubious about organizing foreign language

instruction on the basis of notions and functions rather than grammar and vocabulary for fear that correctness will be sacrificed to communicative expendiency.

3. APPLICATIONS

However tentatively the T-level syllabus may have been put forward by its developers, it has inspired some curriculum designers and textbook authors to put its principles to use. John Munby (1978) has followed Richterich's lead and devised a very detailed survey instrument for determining learners' foreign language needs as a basis for designing courses in Language for Specific Purposes. British and German radio-television networks have cooperatively designed *Follow Me* (BBC, 1978) as a multi-media course in English for German adults, according to proposals worked out by the Council of Europe committee. And several textbooks for English as a Second Language with a notional-functional orientation have been published in the United States as well as in Europe. (See part D of the Selected References). While it is perhaps too early to judge the effectiveness of such materials, it is possible to outline some of the characteristics that distinguish them from materials based on other approaches to foreign language teaching.

As noted earlier, the most obvious difference between courses and materials based on a lexico-grammatical analysis of language and those based on notional-functional principles is in the titles given to units or chapters. The former often produces units on "The Modal Auxiliaries" or "At the Library" where more or less creative attempts are made to build an instructional sequence around certain grammatical or idiomatic patterns. Notional-functional units on the other hand, tend to bear such titles as "Saying What You Feel" or "Getting People to Do Things" (Andrews, 1977) with emphasis on communicative interaction. One technique associated with teaching notional-functional units is role-playing, where students are encouraged to take on various social roles and generate discourse that is appropriate in a realistic situation. While this technique itself is not new, the accompanying discussions of conversational gambits, the relative status of each role to the others, levels of formality, etc., do characterize a shift in focus from the word or sentence to the level of connected, contextualized discourse.

It is perhaps just this shift that makes the notional-functional approach at once both appealing and daunting to many FL teachers. When a committee in Europe claims to have identified *all* of the basic elements that should be learned by anyone wanting to use *any* foreign language for practical purposes, the experienced teacher is intrigued. Yet, when one looks into the T-level syllabus and sees only lists of phrases, notions, functions, and vocabulary items, one realizes how much work is still ahead of the course designer or textbook writer in selecting and sequencing the items and combining them into interesting, teachable lessons. The notional-functional syllabus could thus be called a *pre*-syllabus, as W.R. Lee (1979) has termed it.

The fact that, despite the initial promise of the Council of Europe committee's work, few courses or texts have been wholly based on its principles in the five years since the T-level syllabus appeared would seem to indicate that it has very limited application outside of the project for which it was

developed. That is not to say, however, that the foreign language profession should turn its back on the notional-functional approach and look elsewhere for something to fill the vacuum left by the passing of strict Audiolingualism from the scene. The addition to every FL course of some measure of attention to the semantic and social aspects of language use would be reason enough for the committee to feel that its hard work had been of great value and for the profession to feel that progress in curriculum development is still possible.

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